

## Is Christianity the only true religion, or one among others

(A talk given to a Theological Society in Norwich, England)

The likelihood is that all or nearly all of us here are Christians, though no doubt with varying degrees of commitment to the church. And so the question I am raising is inevitably an uncomfortable one. For we have probably nearly all taken it for granted, for as long as we can remember, that of course Christianity is the only true religion, or at least much the most true. I myself became a Christian by evangelical conversion when a Law student and it was part of the package of belief that I accepted wholeheartedly that Christianity is uniquely superior to all others and the world in process of being converted to Christian faith.

But that was some sixty years ago. In those days, like most of my generation, I had never met anyone of another faith and knew virtually nothing about the other world religions - and the little that I thought I knew has turned out to be largely caricature. But the present generation is generally much better informed. And today we all know, when we stop to think about it, that people of the other world religions have exactly the same view of their own faith as we do of ours.

In other words the religion that seems so obviously superior to anyone depends in the vast majority of cases on where he or she happens to have been born. Someone born into a devout Muslim family in Egypt or Pakistan or Albania (or for that matter in England) is very likely to grow up as a Muslim; someone born into a devout Hindu family in India (or again in England) is very likely to be a Hindu; someone born into a devout Buddhist family in Thailand or Sri Lanka or Burma (or once again England) is very likely to be a Buddhist; just as someone born into a devout Christian family in this country is very likely to be a Christian; and so on.

There are of course and always will be individual conversions for individual reasons in every direction both to and from each of the great world faiths, and generally we must presume that this is a right move; but such conversions are statistically marginal in comparison with the massive transmission of faith from generation to generation within the same religion. So normally the religion that you accept - or of course the religion that you reject - is the one into which you happen to have been born. I think that this is obvious and undeniable, although theologians all too seldom reflect on its implications.

So why do many, in fact probably most, Christians believe that Christianity is uniquely superior to all other faiths, the one and only true religion ?

Well, above all the New Testament says so. We read in St John's Gospel that Jesus said 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' (14:6), 'I and the Father are one' (10:30), 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (14:9), 'before Abraham was, I am' (John 8: 58). In these texts, all from St John's Gospel, does Jesus not clearly claim to be God, or God the Son, incarnate, and is he not claiming that his is the only path of salvation, and thus the only true religion? So in the Acts of the Apostles we read that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name [than that of Christ] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

I must say a little about this New Testament basis of the belief, although it would require a whole week, or more likely a whole year, to discuss it properly. But most New Testament scholars today do *not* believe that Jesus, the historical individual, claimed to be God incarnate. That doesn't mean that they don't believe that Jesus was in fact God incarnate, but they don't think that he himself taught that he was. In case this comes as a surprise to some, I will give some brief quotations. I'm going to quote only from distinguished New Testament scholars who personally believe strongly that the Church has been right in believing that Jesus was God incarnate. They believe this with their whole heart. But nevertheless they hold, on the basis of the evidence, that Jesus did not himself claim this. Referring first to those New Testament sayings which I quoted a minute ago - 'I am the way, the truth, and the life . . .' etc. - Professor Charlie Moule of Cambridge, the doyen of conservative British New Testament scholars writes (in *The Origin of Christology*, 1977, p. 136), 'Any case for a "high"

Christology that depended on the authenticity of the alleged claims of Jesus about himself, especially in the fourth Gospel [i.e. John's], would indeed be precarious'. Also in Cambridge Canon Brian Hebblethwaite of Queen's College, a notable defender of the orthodox doctrine, says (*The Incarnation*, 1987, p. 74) that 'it is no longer possible to defend the divinity of Jesus by reference to the claims of Jesus'. Then the late Archbishop Michael Ramsey (previously a New Testament professor) said in his book *Jesus and the Living Past* (1960, p.39), 'Jesus did not claim deity for himself'. Again, perhaps the leading New Testament scholar in this country today, Professor James Dunn of Durham, after examining minutely every relevant text, in all four Gospels, and indeed throughout the New Testament, writes (*Christology in the Making*, 1980, p. 60) that 'there was no real evidence in the earliest Jesus-tradition of what could fairly be called a consciousness of divinity'. These are all people who accept the traditional Incarnation doctrine, but who are also part of the scholarly consensus that the historical Jesus did not himself teach this. It is generally held today that the great 'I am' sayings of the fourth Gospel, which I quoted a minute ago, cannot be attributed to the historical Jesus but are words put into his mouth by a Christian writer some 60-70 years later, and also that Jesus' sayings in the Synoptic Gospels cannot be taken to constitute a claim to be God incarnate - as Dunn says, 'there was no real evidence in the earliest Jesus-tradition of what could fairly be called a consciousness of divinity'. If this comes to anyone as a bit of a shock, that is because although theologically educated ministers of the church know this, they do not mention it in their sermons. And I must confess that I myself have never said it in a sermon, but only in settings such as this. This silence has been going on for a very long time, and of course the longer you put off saying something difficult - difficult to the hearers - the harder it becomes to say it. When some years ago, 1977, a group of us, who included the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, and a former Regius at Cambridge, then Warden of Keble College, Oxford, and the Principal of Cuddesdon Theological College, Oxford, and others, published a book called *The Myth of God Incarnate* in which we discussed this question openly and frankly, we were attacked and reviled, not for saying what the scholarly world had long known, but for saying it so publicly and with such an alarming title. But today, more than twenty years later, the whole subject is much more openly discussed, and I don't have any hesitation in discussing it here.

It's also well known today - another theme of that book - that the term 'son of God' was widely used in the ancient world. Jesus was by no means the only person to whom the term was applied. In particular, within Jesus' own religion, Judaism, Adam was called the son of God, and is so called in Luke's Gospel where Jesus' ancestry is traced back to 'the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God' (tou Seth tou Adam tou Theou', 3:38), angels were called sons of God, Israel as a whole was called God's son, and indeed any outstandingly pious Jew could be called a son of God. And the ancient Hebrew kings were enthroned as son of God - hence the words of Psalm 2:7, 'Thou art my son, this day I have begotten thee'. But no one within Judaism thought that God literally begot sons. The phrase 'son of God' was clearly metaphorical. 'son of' meant 'true servant of' or sometimes 'given a special divine mission by' or more generally 'in the spirit of'. The term was a very familiar metaphor within Judaism and never implied deity. But as Christianity expanded beyond its Jewish roots into the Graeco-Roman world the metaphorical son of God was gradually transformed in Christian thinking into the metaphysical God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity. And it is this epoch-making development that is under question today.

Now in the discussions of the last twenty or so years, the idea that Christianity is the only true religion and only source of salvation, and that only Christians are saved, is today generally called exclusivism, in distinction from the two other main positions, called inclusivism and pluralism.

However today the majority of Christian theologians and church leaders have moved away from this strict exclusivism to what is called inclusivism. This concentrates primarily on the question of salvation, and is the view that salvation is indeed through Christ alone in virtue of his atoning death on the cross, but that this salvation is not confined to Christians but is available, in principle, to all human beings. So non-Christians also can be included within the sphere of Christian salvation - hence the term inclusivism. People of good will outside the Church can be said to have an implicit Christian faith, or to be anonymous Christians, or to be in such a state that they *will* respond to Christ as their lord and saviour when they confront him after death. On this view Christianity remains the only true religion; but those who do not

know Christ can also benefit from his atoning death. This position was adopted by the Catholic Church at the second Vatican Council in the 1960's and is the position of the present Pope and also of a majority of theologians within the other mainline Christian churches, including the Church of England, the Methodists, the United Reformed Church, Baptists, etc. - except in each case for their fundamentalist wings. Its attraction is that on the one hand it preserves the traditional conviction of the unique centrality/normativeness/superiority of Christianity, but on the other hand it does not involve the horrifying implication that only Christians can be saved. This is why it is today so attractive and remains such a popular position.

But it does have its negative side. If we think for a moment of the analogy of the solar system, with God as the sun at the centre and the religions as planets revolving around that centre, the inclusivist position says in effect that the life-giving light and warmth of the sun falls directly only on our earth, but is then reflected off it to the other religions, which thus receive it at second hand. Or in terms of economics this is a kind of trickle down theory of salvation. We Christians are the spiritually rich at the top but our riches trickle down in varying measure to the people of the other world religions below. And just how realistic this is will depend on what we mean by salvation.

If you define salvation as being forgiven and accepted by God because of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, then salvation is by definition Christian salvation and Christianity is by definition the only true religion. That is to settle the matter by definition. Suppose however that instead of doing this we start with the realities of human life around the world as we find it and mean by salvation something concrete, something that can take place progressively in people's lives, something that is meant to begin here and now in this life and to make a manifest difference. We can describe it as the gradual transformation of men and women from natural self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the divine reality that we call God, liberating us into love and compassion for our fellow beings. On this view it is those who love their neighbours; who have compassion - that is feeling with and for others, - and who give something of their time, energy, intelligence, resources to those in much greater need both far and near, who are on the path of salvation. Or again, putting it in biblical terms, it is those whose lives embody what St Paul called the fruit of the spirit, which he described as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians, 5: 22) - to which we must I think add a commitment to social justice as an expression of love - who are on the way of salvation. Its not a question of Are you saved or not saved? but of the direction in which you are going, the path you are on.

Now the call to self-transcending love and compassion comes to humanity through a number of channels. Jesus taught that we are to love and value our neighbours as we love and value ourselves, even to love those who regard themselves as our enemies, so that 'you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matthew 5: 44-5). Others hear the call to an equal concern for all in the Hebrew scriptures in such divine commands as 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19: 18), or in the teaching of the Talmud, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary' (*Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 31a). Others again hear it such Hindu teachings as one on which Mahatma Gandhi based his life: 'If a man give you a drink of water and you give him a drink in return, that is nothing. Real beauty consists in doing good against evil . . . The truly noble know all men as one, and return with gladness good for evil done.' (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, I, chap.10). And yet others hear it in such Buddhist teachings as 'As a mother cares for her son, her only son, all her days, so towards all living things a man's mind should be all-embracing' (*Sutta Nipata*, 143). And yet others hear it in the Qur'an, where we read 'Repel evil with what is good. Then you will find your erstwhile enemy like a close, affectionate friend' (41: 34), or in the teachings of the Sufis of Islam, such as this parable of Rumi's, 'God rebuked Moses, saying, 'I fell sick, thou camest not.' Moses said, 'O transcendent One, what mystery is this. Explain, O Lord!' God said again to him, 'Wherefore didst thou not kindly ask after me when I was sick?' Moses answered, 'Lord, thou never ailest. My understanding is lost.' God said, 'Yea, a favourite and chosen servant of mine fell sick. Consider well: his infirmity is My infirmity, his sickness is My sickness' (Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, p. 65). You see, such ideas are genuinely Christian, but they are also genuinely Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist. There is in fact a basic moral outlook which is universal, and the

concrete reality of salvation consists in a spiritual transformation whose natural expression is unrestricted love and compassion. I stress the word *basic*, because what is common to the different faiths is this truly basic principle, not the specific moral codes which have developed within different societies at different times and places and in different circumstances. These latter reflect the particular historical circumstances in which they were formulated and are not immutable, but ought to develop as societies change, and when they don't they can produce evil instead of good. We see this, for example, in some of the harsh rules of desert life in parts of the Old Testament and in parts of the Shariah of Islam, and also, in a lesser way nearer to home in current debates within the churches about the ordination of women, about the remarriage of divorced persons, and about homosexuality. New moral sensitivities, and new scientific knowledge, rightly enter into the development of our specific social norms.

But the *basic* moral teaching of the religions remains the same. It constitutes the universal ideal. But how does it actually work out in people's lives? Do Christians in fact respond to it better than the rest of humankind? Are Christians in general better human beings, morally and spiritually, than non-Christians in general? This is the question that I would invite you to focus upon. In order to answer it of course one has to get to know people of other faiths; and this is much easier for some than for others. Birmingham, for example, where I live, is a multi-faith city. There are eighty thousand or more Muslims, large Sikh and Hindu communities, a smaller but long established Jewish community, and growing number of Buddhists and Bahais. When you go into the mosques, synagogues, gurudwaras, temples, as well as churches, something strikes you, or at least has struck me, very forcibly. On the one hand, all the externals are different. When you go into a Hindu temple, for example, the sights, colours, sounds, smells are those of India and you can easily imagine yourself back there. And not only what the senses perceive, but also the language, the concepts, the whole way of thinking are distinctively Hindu. And the same is true in their different ways of each of the other places of worship. But at a much deeper level it seems evident that essentially the same thing is going on in all these other places as in our Christian churches – namely men and women are coming together under the auspices of some ancient highly developed tradition which helps them to open their minds and hearts 'upwards' to a higher divine reality which makes a claim upon the living of their lives; and the basic claim is in each case, as I illustrated a few minutes ago, the same. So it seems right to say with the thirteenth century Muslim writer Jalaludin Rumi, writing about the religions of his time, 'The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond' (*Rumi, Poet and Mystic*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, 1978, p. 166).

But further, it is a very common experience of Christians in such a city as Birmingham that when you get to know some of your neighbours of other faiths - and you meet them today in every walk of life, but particularly when you know individuals and families - you do not find that they are in general any less loving and caring, any less honest, any less likely to help a neighbour when someone next door is ill or in some trouble and needing friendly support, any less law-abiding, any less concerned for the good of society, any less ready to make sacrifices for the education of their children, any less faithful in the practice of their religion, than are our Christian fellow citizens in general. I do not say any more, but I do say not any less. There are good and bad people, and all degrees of goodness and badness, within each faith community, including Christianity; but it does not seem that Christians in general stand out as morally and spiritually superior to everyone else.

And there's another kind of encounter has been to me equally important. Partly in the course of inter-faith dialogue over a number of years with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs, and from time spent in the heartlands of these other faiths, I have had the very good fortune to come to know a small number of individuals whom I regard as, in Christian terms, saints - saints in the sense that they have largely transcended the ego point of view and become channels of the higher divine reality. Such all-too-rare individuals are extremely important to us, because they make it much easier for us to believe in the higher reality to which the religions point. And they are to be found not only within Christianity but within each of the great faith traditions.

And, although this is a huge topic which I cannot open up here, I do not think that history shows Christian civilization through the centuries to have been morally superior to all other civilizations. It is an unpleasant business to compare historical evils, but since many people take it for granted that Christianity has a manifestly cleaner record than the rest of the world, I

would just remind you of the centuries-long persecution of the Jews, the Crusades, the burning of witches and heretics, the conquest and exploitation of what today we call the Third world, the carrying off so many of its people as slaves, the history of Christian Europe through the twentieth century, which saw two terrible wars between Christian nations in which tens of millions were killed, and the Jewish Holocaust, and churches supporting Fascist dictators in Italy, Spain, Brazil, San Salvador, Chile (the most recent being General Pinochet), and for a whole generation supporting apartheid in South Africa . . . But we can take all this up further if you want to in the discussion period.

And so it just does not seem to me that Christians, either individually or collectively, are manifestly better human beings than the rest of the human race.

But - and this is the question that we now have to ask ourselves - is this what you would expect if our traditional doctrines are straightforwardly true? According to these doctrines we have an uniquely direct knowledge to God in Christ, an uniquely direct access to and relationship with God in prayer and worship in the name of Christ, and the direct presence of God with us in the sacraments of the church. Would you not then expect all this to make a visible difference in the lives of Christians? Would you not expect the fruits of the spirit to be more evident in Christians than in non-Christians? I suggest to you that we should expect that, because otherwise the unique superiority of Christianity would be mere rhetoric. But then on the other hand can we honestly claim that Christians are in fact morally and spiritually better human beings, in general, than non-Christians?

You see where all this is pointing - to the conclusion that perhaps Christianity is not after all the one and only true, or one and only salvific, religion. So this brings us to the third option that I mentioned for understanding the global religious situation. I've said a little about exclusivism, and more about inclusivism. Now the third option, generally called pluralism. This holds that there is not just one and only one point of salvific contact between the divine reality and humanity, namely in the person of Jesus Christ, but that there is a plurality of independently valid contacts, and independently authentic spheres of salvation, which include both Christianity and the other great world faiths.

In developing this pluralist point of view I am assuming that religion is our human response to a transcendent reality, the reality that we call God. And as a *human* response there is always an inescapably *human* element within it. To remind ourselves of this, look at the histories of both Judaism and Christianity. The image of Jahweh reflected in the Old Testament develops over the centuries from a violent tribal god who commands the Israelites to engage in genocide against the original inhabitants of Palestine ['go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass', I Sam. 15:3] to the universal Lord, blessed be He, of later and modern Judaism. Within Christianity, for quite a long period of time in the medieval world most Christians thought of God as a terrible figure who would send most human beings to eternal hell, and before whom they trembled in terror, expecting to be judged by the equally terrible figure of Christ, and their Christian faith was largely one of dread. Life's calamities - disease, death, droughts, plagues, floods and so on - were seen as God's punishments for human sin. And because life was so precarious, they thought that God must be very angry with his human creatures. For mercy they looked to their local saints and to the figure of the Virgin Mary, who might intercede on their behalf. It was only in the 13th and 14th centuries that Jesus came again to be thought of by many as manifesting divine love, which is how most of us think today. Now is it God's nature that has changed through the centuries or is it our human images of God that have changed? Clearly, it is our human images of God.

So in other words, between ourselves and God as God is in God's ultimate transcendent being there is a screen of varied and changing human images of God - not graven images but mental images, or pictures, or concepts of God. And our awareness of God is always through and in terms of these human images. We worship God through our own images of God, to which our human ideas and cultural assumptions have inevitably contributed. These mental images not only differ considerably between religions, but also within a given religion. In fact if we could see into one another's minds now I believe we would find a great range of images or concepts of God in this room.

But how can this be? The basic principle involved was stated long ago by Thomas Aquinas when he said 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower' (S.T., II/II, Q.1, art 2). This is a principle that was taught in a much more massively systematic way by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and which has been strongly confirmed since by cognitive psychology and the sociology of knowledge. 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower', and the mode of the knower differs as between the different religions and the different cultures and histories within which they have arisen. This, I suggest, is the basic clue to a religious understanding of the fact of many religions each producing, so far as we can tell, equally valuable fruits in human life.

I've been concentrating so far mainly on the question of salvation. But what, more briefly, about the different and often incompatible teachings of the different religions, what about their conflicting truth-claims? For example, for Christians God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whereas for Jews and Muslims God is strictly unitary; for Christians Jesus was the second person of a divine Trinity, whereas for people of all the other religions he was a great prophet or teacher or guru but was not literally God walking on earth. Again, for the monotheisms the ultimate reality, the absolutely real, is an infinite person but for Buddhism, for example, the ultimate reality is not a person but a reality beyond the scope even of the personal/impersonal distinction. And of course on a less basic level there are innumerable other differences between the teachings of the different faiths. But how can this be if they are all responses to the same ultimate reality that in Christian language we call God?

Well, if we accept the distinction between the divine reality as it is in itself and as variously imaged by us, then our Christian doctrines are about the ultimate divine reality as conceived by us, in distinction from that reality as it is in itself. And the different truth-claims of the different religions are claims about *different* manifestations of the Ultimate to different human mentalities formed within different human cultures and different streams of religious history. As such, they do not contradict one another. That Muslims, for example, think of the divine, and experience the divine, as the Qur'anic Allah is not incompatible with the fact that Christians think of the divine, and experience the divine, as the heavenly Father of Jesus' teaching, or more theologically as the Holy Trinity. In other words, what are called the conflicting truth-claims of the religions do not in fact conflict, because they are claims about different human awarenesses of the divine, made possible by the fact that, to quote Aquinas again, things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.

But there is something else important to be said before I finish. There is a valid sense in which, for those of us who are Christians, Christianity *is* the only true religion, the only one for us. For we have been formed by it. It has created us in its own image, so that it fits us and we fit it as no other religion can. And so for most of us who are Christians it is the right religion, and we should stick with it and live it out to the full. But we should also be aware that exactly the same is true for people formed by the other world religions. They also should stick with the religion that has formed them and live it out, though in each case gradually filtering out its ingrained claim to unique superiority.

So the bottom line, I am suggesting, is this: we should live wholeheartedly within our own faith, so long as we find it to be sustaining and a sphere of spiritual growth, but we should freely recognise the equal validity of the other great world faiths for *their* adherents, and we can also be enriched by some of their insights and spiritual practices. We should not see the other religions as rivals or enemies, or look down upon them as inferior, but simply as different human responses to the divine reality, formed in the past within different strands of human history and culture. And we should seek a friendship with people of other faiths which will do something to defuse the very dangerous religious absolutism that is being exploited in almost all the conflicts going on in the world today. To support religious absolutism is to be part of the problem which afflicts humanity. But we can be part of the solution by setting an example of transcending that absolutism.

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